

# Basic Writing and Disciplinary Maturation: How Chance Conversations Continue to Shape the Field

Edward M. White and William DeGenaro

*ABSTRACT: Thirty years ago, Maxine Hairston observed that disciplinary shifts in writing studies occur not gradually but rather due to revolutionary “paradigm shifts.” Perhaps. But even as the discipline has grown, chance encounters, collaborations rooted in friendship, conversations and coffees, and the discovery of mutual acquaintances have continued to play roles. The subfield we call basic writing has maintained an ethos informed by these “small moments,” and even as the subfield has matured in the last fifteen years, we have collectively stayed small and ought to continue fostering an atmosphere that is paradoxically mature but also serendipitous, friendly, and even informal. This article is about BW’s burgeoning (sub-) disciplinary maturity. In equal part, though, we tell our own stories, and reflect on how serendipitous that engagement has been, ultimately arguing that the BW community continue to foster and expand serendipitous engagement.*

*KEYWORDS: abolition; basic writing; discipline; mainstreaming; mentoring; outcomes statement; research methodologies*

What does it mean to say that *basic writing* has matured as a subfield?<sup>1</sup> The subfield of *basic writing studies* as a distinct enterprise within the larger discipline of composition and rhetoric has matured, which is to say BW scholars can (and do) collectively point to agreed-upon, discipline-sanctioned touchstones. Moreso than fifteen years ago, we comprise a community that uses these touchstones productively to create both new knowledge and new programs. A little more than fifteen years ago, the two of us wrote

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in this journal that BW had failed to locate “professional consensus” due to researchers’ tendency not “to listen much to each other or to build on each others’ findings” (DeGenaro and White 23). We pointed to cross-talk between theorist-critics who critiqued BW as a “sorting and placing” apparatus and empirical researchers who had amassed evidence of the material value of BW and suggested this cross-talk was evidence of immaturity. We stand by that analysis, which was of a time, reflective of and informed by trends large and small. Since then, this same note has certainly echoed (though differently) in productive debates regarding emerging models of entrance assessment and the role of the WPA Outcomes Statement. Indeed we want to suggest that in the intervening years, maturation in basic writing studies has occurred in ways that suggest perhaps “consensus” was not the primary element the subfield was lacking.

The maturation in BW has not always brought with it *consensus* per se, though the WPA Outcomes Statement (OS), for instance, has been both a productive and *stabilizing force* that has institutionalized, though not standardized, the pedagogies of first-year composition courses, including BW courses (see Behm, Glau, Holdstein, Roen, and White, especially Olson; Sternglass). Wendy Olson sorts out the symbiotic relationship between the OS and basic writing courses, arguing although it is not desirable that, nor is it the objective of, the OS to provide a model for a standard BW curriculum, the OS has in its decade of existence given writing programs an “opportunity to make the case for a necessarily complex pedagogy within basic writing classrooms.” Likewise, Olson writes, the OS itself has been informed by “basic writing pedagogy” (21). So in the years since our argument that basic writing suffered from a lack of disciplinary maturity, the pervasive and influential WPA Outcomes Statement has both made use of diverse BW pedagogies and practices and in turn guided writing programs seeking to make their BW programs more “complex,” to use Olson’s helpful term. The OS is an example of disciplinary maturity in composition and rhetoric writ large, to be sure, but the institutional-cum-disciplinary stability the statement fosters has created an environment wherein BW practitioners can argue with greater credibility and force for sound—and increasingly creative, out-of-the-box—programming for the sometimes vulnerable students which BW programs and courses support. It’s no coincidence that BW innovation has thrived in the post-OS era.

With maturity, BW has maintained a particular ethos, though suggestive of a paradox. As the subfield has changed, it has stayed the same. At the same time the subfield has matured, it has remained small and held tight to

the importance of coffee breaks, small moments, and collaboration across rank and institution type. Optimistically, we have become more inclined to listen to one another in productive ways—perhaps freed from the constraints of searching for mythic *consensus*, perhaps empowered by the OS, perhaps compelled by the body of scholarship (less polarizing but equally strident, equally tied to context and the potential to affect positive change).

This essay celebrates those small moments, celebrates collaboration, and celebrates mentoring by looking at the maturation across twenty years of the subfield of BW. We don't offer a thorough state of the subfield (see Otte and Mlynarczyk), nor an exhaustive literature review (though we recommend the newest edition of the *Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing*, which annotates much of this important work), nor a detailed taxonomy of methodologies (a possibly interesting project, though it seems obvious that we have long been methodologically diverse—doing work that *cuts across* theory, classroom and teacher-research inquiry, history, and much more) before and during the maturation we posit. Instead, we are most interested in exploring the significance of a subfield that we argue has become more productive in its disciplinary maturity while at the same time continuing to maintain its “smallness.” We offer this exploration via our own story of small moments, collaboration, and mentoring—and then offer our own analysis of what the subfield might continue to do to live this productive paradox.

As our parent discipline, rhetoric and composition, was coming into its maturity, Maxine Hairston observed that disciplinary shifts in writing studies occur not gradually but rather due to revolutionary “paradigm shifts” in our collective thinking. Perhaps. But even as writing studies writ large has grown, chance encounters, collaborations rooted in friendship, conversations and coffees at 4Cs, and the discovery of mutual acquaintances have continued to play roles too. As the field of rhetoric and composition grew it remained small, characterized by personal moments and close encounters. New ideas in subfields like basic writing studies, likewise, emerge thanks to many different factors, not the least of which is serendipity.<sup>2</sup> What important book or article has emerged without one or two or more coincidences or intimate moments shaping its core ideas? Our field is not wholly unique in this regard. A recent *New Yorker* piece told the story of two geneticists and the role a traffic jam played in shaping their scholarly agenda, which in turn led to important disciplinary findings (Mukherjee). A field no less empirical, no less serious, no less “mature” than genetic biology! The chain of accidental encounters that has led to this essay extends for fully twenty years, from a chance meeting at a WPA conference in Ohio in 1994 to a chance visit from

a mid-career academic to his retired graduate school mentor in Arizona in 2014. This is a story about disciplinary maturation in BW and an essay about chance encounters.

### **Snapshot 1: Oxford, Ohio, 1994**

**By Ed**

*A sunny noon break in the Writing Program Administrators conference at Miami University in Ohio. I take a noonday stroll and spot Sharon Crowley sitting by herself at a cafe and join her for lunch. Friendly small talk leads me to ask Sharon how she can reconcile her passionate concern for the less privileged students with her equally passionate advocacy that “the universal course” in first-year writing be made an elective. I echo her passion when I say, “The weakest writers will avoid the course if they can for fear of failure and that course helps many of them stay in college.” Sharon smiles. “There’s no evidence for that,” she says. I reply that I have such evidence, from my work in the central office of the California State University system. “OK,” Sharon says pleasantly as we return to the conference. “Then you should publish it.”*

*As a result of that chance meeting and conversation, my article “The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Helping Students Succeed under the New Elitism” appears in the Journal of Basic Writing the following year, with this abstract:*

A new elitism and its (however unintended) theorists, the new abolitionists, seek to abandon the required freshman composition course and the placement tests that help students succeed in it and in college. This paper argues for placement into the course and is based on two sets of studies: a series of follow-up studies of Fall 1978 First-Time California State University Freshmen and a series of reports analyzing a four-semester overview conducted by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council, Fall 1984 to Spring 1989. As the data show, the effect of a placement program, followed by a careful instructional program, is to allow many students who would otherwise leave school to continue successfully in the university. (75)

*Sharon Crowley replies to my article in this journal in 1996, arguing that the history of first-year composition is exclusionary, that it is a “repressive institution” (89) for many students, “using mass examinations to segregate them into classrooms that can be readily identified as remedial or special” (90). She rejects my identification of her position with elitism, saying that she is just rejecting “our institutional obligation, imposed on us from elsewhere, to coerce everyone in the*

*university into studying composition*" (91). Sharon offers a compelling version of her call to grant greater agency to first-year students and thereby curb problematic institutional practices such as overinvesting in placement (what she argued were sorting and segregating) mechanisms. She engages a good deal with both the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of such mechanisms though less, in my view, with the empirical data I presented: data that show students entering the CSU and New Jersey campuses with failing scores on a careful placement test who receive institutional help with writing are present at a 56% rate two years later, while those who do not receive such help are still enrolled at a 16% rate.

### **Snapshot 2: Tucson, Arizona, 1998**

**By Bill**

*Early in my career as a doctoral student at the University of Arizona, I still felt far from home—home was a small, blue-collar place: Youngstown, Ohio—in the midst of Tucson’s looming saguaro cacti and the English Department’s looming faculty of national renown. I had taught basic writing for a few semesters back at Youngstown State University (security guards, auto workers, football players under Coach Jim Tressel before Ohio State lured him away from YSU) and knew I wanted to study working-class students and the Basic Writing enterprise. But Arizona was an intimidating place and maybe, I thought, I shouldn’t have packed up and left behind all things familiar.*

*Two things I recall about the August when I arrived in Tucson: 1) Bill Clinton on the small television in my small apartment finally admitting he had an affair with Monica Lewinsky, as I sat at the kitchen table working on my syllabus for my first term as a TA; 2) Being assigned Ed White as my mentor. Since we had never met, Ed volunteered to pick me up and drive me to the fall kick-off party at the home of Roxanne Mountford, suggesting that the drive to Roxanne’s house would be a chance to chat. I credit that drive and that chat for helping me lessen the symptoms of imposter syndrome. Especially the chance exchange wherein Ed asked me about hobbies and I told him I had a passion for cooking. Ed’s response, and I’m paraphrasing, was something like, “How about I come over next Tuesday?” He did, and brought a few other graduate students he mentored. Also, a bottle of wine. But I didn’t have a corkscrew, I suppose because I was 23-years-old and had just hauled myself and my worldly possessions 2,000 miles in a pick-up truck. Ed ran up to Fry’s grocery store, bought me one, and in an early, important bit of mentoring, advised, “You should have a corkscrew.”*

*So began an unlikely supper club at my modest apartment wherein food and drink and conversation were all robust. We met irregularly, often at my place, some-*

*times elsewhere, and always there were calories. I imagine this kind of interaction happens in any good graduate program where mentors take their work seriously and do their work well, but I'm struck not only by how the interactions and debates were sometimes as important as what went on in our seminars but also by how a transformative experience began by chance: a carpool, Ed's outgoing nature, my own affinity for feeding friends. Ed extended several offers to collaborate during my grad school years—an article, an online module for a textbook publisher, several community-based assessment projects—opportunities, all, for discovering, honing, and clarifying what I thought about the matters that led me to the field of writing studies: basic writers and basic writing programs.*

### **Snapshot 3: Tucson, Arizona, 1999**

**By Bill and Ed**

*By the late 1990s, scholars invested in the basic writing subfield of composition and rhetoric had not reached clear consensus about two of the most fundamental matters connected to what we do as teachers of first-year writing: how to identify and whether to mainstream basic writers and whether to advocate for composition as a universal, i.e. campus-wide, requirement. Now, to be sure, part of the lack of disciplinary consensus was due to the fact that local, institutional factors played—and of course continue to play—significant roles in determining needs of first-year writers. Still, at a moment when at least two generations of scholars in contemporary writing studies had generated both empirical studies and theoretical and critical scholarship about the foundational enterprise of first-year and basic writing, the lack of consensus was noteworthy.*

*During this disciplinary moment, Crowley expanded the line of reasoning from her JBW response essay and other arguments she had been making throughout much of her career and published Composition in the University, a provocative and ambitious text that historicized and critiqued “freshman English” and concluded that courses like BW were possibly doing more harm than good: proliferating bad labor practices, preventing the field’s advancement, and impeding the development of more meaningful and transformative writing instruction. The “abolition” movement—the movement to abolish not first-year writing courses but rather first-year writing course requirements—had its most compelling, fully realized, and widely discussed document.*

*Critics of sorting and segregating “basic writers” were using arguments informed by a similar ethos and orientation. Like Crowley, those critical of the basic writing enterprise were engaging in a kind of ideological critique—focusing on the broader institutional and cultural values and assumptions being prolifer-*

*ated by programs that assessed students (often by invalid multiple-choice tests) and subsequently imposed placements perceived to be draconian impediments to progress-toward-degree. For instance, Ira Shor published in the Journal of Basic Writing “Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality” about the same time. Like Crowley’s book, “Our Apartheid” also focused on both historical development of curriculum and current labor problematics; also like Crowley, Shor’s text was unapologetically provocative. His metaphor for most placement testing, “a gate below the gate” (94), was memorable.*

*Scholars like Crowley and Shor informed (at least) two prominent scholarly conversations happening in the field at the time. In Tucson, meanwhile, Ed was teaching research methods and having graduate students including Bill read Stephen North’s The Making of Knowledge in Composition, essentially a taxonomy of research communities working in the discipline (the ethnographers, the clinicians, etc.). He asked each student that semester to identify an interesting issue, question, or debate in the field; find examples of scholarship that engaged that issue from as many different methodological communities (a la North) as they could find; and then compose a kind of literature review cum methodological analysis of those artifacts. Bill chose the mainstreaming debate.*

*That term paper began as a document that stuck pretty close to North’s categories. Bill found scholarship that was empirical in its orientation, theoretical in its orientation, and still other instances of published work on the topic of mainstreaming basic writers that could probably fit in what North called the “house of lore.” But something else began to emerge: a lack of cooperation among the methodological communities, a disconnect between different types of scholarship, a lack of cross-talk between, say, the “critics” and the “empiricists.” While we were discussing this matter—a simple discussion of a draft of a paper for a graduate class—Ed showed Bill a letter from JBW he had just received, an invitation to contribute to the journal’s 20th anniversary issue and said, “We ought to write about this.” It was a chance conversation, a teacher and student who happened to be meeting about a seminar paper-in-progress. There was serendipity in the assignment that was part of our class, the letter from the Journal of Basic Writing, and in the curiosities and interests we have about the field.*

*That assignment in the methods class was especially generative for Bill, and also of a time. North published his book during a decade (the 1980s) when composition and rhetoric was coming into maturity and the assignment was perhaps most operative during a decade (the 1990s) when North’s categories had not yet been expanded and challenged by technological and institutional changes as they have been in the new millennium, and when BW as a subfield in particular was in the midst of robust, though not always productive, debates about funda-*

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*mental—indeed existential—issues over whether courses in BW ought to be. But regardless, the assignment and the close reading of both North's text and the basic writing scholarship helped clarify for Bill the importance of critical interrogation of questions regarding placement, pedagogy, mainstreaming, and overall how to contend with less prepared college writers. The cross-talk (and at times the lack thereof) among critics, empirical researchers, and practitioners showed how little agreement there was about how to seek answers to those questions. We continued exploring the scholarship, the debate, and the moments when the disagreement seemed productive and the moments when it did not, during the next months and the term paper eventually became a collaborative article in JBW, "Going Around in Circles: Methodological Issues in Basic Writing Research," indeed published in the journal's 20th anniversary issue.*

#### **Snapshot 4: Tempe, Arizona, 1999**

**By Ed**

*Whenever the Western States Composition Conference was held at nearby Arizona State University, I made sure that our research methods class was on the program. As it happened, the year Bill was in my class we gave a well-received presentation, with him as one of the presenters. Afterwards, we went for a celebratory drink and there, in an echo from the past, was Sharon at the center of a group of students. We joined the group and I introduced Bill to her. When she asked what he was working on, he briefly summarized our analysis of the cross-talk in basic writing research and most politely asked her for her thoughts on the place of data in the mainstreaming debate. Her reply was that she was most interested in the concepts and assumptions in composition scholarship. I noticed Bill smiling later as he took notes about that brief conversation, since it provided additional opportunity to consider how knowledge is created and circulated and the extent to which "consensus" (or possibly productive cross-talk) is an objective for which we should aim. She had not paid much attention, for instance, to the charts in my article.*

#### **Snapshot 5: Flagstaff, Arizona, 2014**

**By Bill and Ed**

*Time together in Tucson meant collaboration and mentoring but in the years after Bill graduated and Ed retired (sort of), time together meant brief conversations at 4Cs and emails. We hadn't spent much face time together between 2002 and 2014 but in the summer of 2014, we made plans to get together for the afternoon in Flagstaff. Coincidentally, the call-for-papers for an edited volume on serendipity in writing research had just landed on Ed's desk.<sup>3</sup> As conversation made its way*

*from politics to families to writing programs, Ed remarked, as he had some fifteen years prior, “We ought to write something.” About chance encounters and friendship. So what has changed in the last fifteen years? One of us is partially retired but continues to write from home base in Flagstaff, Arizona. The other graduated and finds himself, more or less, at mid-career, with tenure and a position directing a mid-sized writing program in Michigan. In different places but still two individuals who enjoy one another’s company. And basic writing studies? We could say the same thing. In a different place but still an enterprise that has held true to a core ethos.*

### **Basic Writing and Maturation**

Whereas existential debates about mainstreaming were a large part of the disciplinary discourse circa 1998-1999, particularly in periodicals like *Journal of Basic Writing* and at conferences like the 4Cs, these matters aren’t as hotly contested today. In the subfield of basic writing studies, fewer books and articles are being published on the matter of mainstreaming basic writers into standard first-year composition courses. Soon after our initial collaboration, the important collection *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* assembled diverse perspectives that sorted through the complex issues that warrant consideration. Editors Gerri McNenny and Sallyanne Fitzgerald did not seek consensus nor engage in reductive debates about whether or not to mainstream but rather acknowledged that local and material conditions inevitably intersect with institutional constraints as well as sometimes rapidly shifting student needs like increased numbers of L2 writers, for instance. The discussion was complex and markedly mature and though some fifteen years old, the collection continues to be a text often utilized by WPAs and BW professionals of various stripes.

Fewer programs are experimenting with mainstreaming, if we may continue pointing to mainstreaming as an example of a disciplinary conversation and institutional/programmatic practice. To be sure, some institutions and even systems have eliminated basic writing courses and mainstreamed their basic writers (by choice or, lest our analysis seem Pollyanna-ish, by legislative fiat), thereby rendering the question of mainstreaming moot. However, more campuses have traveled what are perhaps even more creative curricular and institutional avenues, instituting Stretch and Studio programs, for example, as ways to serve their basic writers. Fifteen years ago, in our *JBW* piece, we suggested the field needed to continue evolving into a “mature field of study” (22), one in which productive conversations between methodologically diverse scholars lead to consensus or at least more fruitful cross-talk. That

seems to have occurred, especially insomuch as creative pedagogical and institutional arrangements have taken hold in many diverse sites.<sup>4</sup>

Fifteen years on, the innovative practices in basic writing programs and the sophisticated conversations in the pages of this journal (which inform those programs) strike us not only as shifting conversations but as signs of disciplinary maturity. The subjects of coffee-break conference conversations have shifted, and so have institutional practices, as well as the subjects garnering attention in journals like *JBW*. One of the reasons we find this evolution to be a mark of maturity is that the specific innovations are marked by even greater nuance. Mainstreaming is no longer a black/white proposition: Should we do it or not? A program like the Stretch model shifts the experience of less-prepared college writers in qualitative and quantitative ways by creating a yearlong Comp I experience (see Glau; Rankins-Robertson, Cahill, Roen, and Glau). The Studio model, likewise, creates a wholly different, co-curricular environment for basic writers to increase metacognitive awareness of the writing process (see Grego and Thompson; Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson).

It's worth noting that the Studio model, for instance, attends to the matter of student agency that Crowley foregrounds in so much of her most useful scholarship (the Studio program at Miami of Ohio that Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson describe is an elective) while also supporting less-prepared college writers by providing additional attention to the conventions and norms of academic culture. Likewise, these creative approaches both answer important ethical critiques about the punitive nature of traditional, stand-alone basic writing classes while also being mindful of the value of empirical data to assess the teaching and learning in ways that are meaningful to internal and external audiences. The Stretch program at Arizona State University, for instance, has touted its own ethical and empirical soundness by framing the program's connection to retention, including retention of students of color ("Stretch Award"). Likewise, the work that Grego and Thompson have done on the Studio model at the University of South Carolina underscores the paradigm's emphasis at once on generating usable data *and* attending to the agency and material conditions of students, teachers, and other potentially vulnerable stakeholders.

That is not to say that Studio or Stretch are panaceas. The economic and cultural forces in our society that diminish or deter student preparation for college cannot be ignored. Nor is this meant to be dismissive of the very real, very problematic pressures on basic writing programs imposed by regressive state legislatures and/or regressive central administrations.

However, we present these examples of disciplinary progress informed by nuance, collaboration, and attention to both empirical data *and* theory. Any list of innovative, “mature” programs serving “basic writers” would have to include the Accelerated Learning Program (or ALP) that Peter Adams and his colleagues at the Community College of Baltimore County. ALP allows BW students to elect to mainstream into a section of first-year composition while also matriculating in a co-curricular workshop led by the same FYC instructor who provides additional support in areas including invention and brainstorming for FYC assignments as well as attention to sentence-level errors on works-in-progress (Adams; *ALP* website). Like Arizona State’s Stretch program, ALP has received national attention for curricular innovation. Like Studio, ALP has been a paradigm and movement mindful of the value of generating data that can be used to make arguments in front of a wide variety of stakeholders. ALP has distinguished itself by *also* working to remain affordable, demonstrating how the program can be replicated without breaking the bank.

This is not to cheerlead for the subfield—though a little bit of optimism can be a good thing. Rather, this is to point out that in just fifteen years, the contentious, closely connected debates over abolition and mainstreaming have largely disappeared from professional journals, listservs, conference talks, and ad hoc discussions. This is especially noteworthy, given how hot-button was the issue, especially following the release of Crowley’s book around the time Ed was offering his research methods class back in Tucson. Again, we refer to one of the central premises of our *JBW* article from 2000, which asked why, aside from the limits of studying formal grammar in foundational writing classes, “it is hard to come up with other examples of professional consensus” in writing studies. We suggested that the lack of consensus was hindering progress. We wrote, “We are defining progress in our field as the development of professional consensus about key issues: findings or premises are published, debated and tested over time, and certain matters are, as a result of the professional dialectic, considered settled” (23). We were thinking of the face-to-face conversations between Ed and Sharon—friendly and collegial albeit without a shared set of assumptions—as well as the provocative though not always productive polemical scholarship in circulation: the in-print conversations between the critics and the empiricists. So what changed since we were graduate student and mentor, circa the turn of the millennium?

To renew our earlier point, one of the factors that perhaps cooled these debates was the release, wide circulation, and ever-growing usage of the WPA

Outcomes Statement (see Behm, Glau, Holdstein, Roen, and White for a variety of treatments of the statement's history and trajectory). The OS has in many ways provided, if not consensus, then professional ethos for the entire enterprise of basic writing and first-year writing programs. The OS has a kind-of built in flexibility, an acknowledgment that local needs and dynamics must always be considered and assessed, while also asserting the values and the possibilities of University-level rhetoric and writing instruction, at the first-year level, and—as Crowley herself advocated—integrated vertically throughout the curriculum as well. If anything, the field has an even greater ethic of respecting local situations and needs, but the OS has served, in the best possible ways, a unifying function, assisting the discipline's move toward an even greater maturity compared to, say, 1999.

We are also in a place where a useful and usable text like *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, can be published. The book purports to articulate some of the core principles and notions of the field—many with significant implications for the BW subfield. Less concerned with labels and taxonomies, *Naming What We Know* assembles agreed-upon, established concepts that the field can put into action in various pedagogical, scholarly, and community-based sites. This is not to say the text is a sign that debate and dissent are dead. However, the release of the text marks a recognition of the usefulness of disciplinary maturation. And yet chance encounters and small moments are still part of our work; coffee, conversation, and intimacy still matter too.

And while we see other factors as perhaps more important signifiers of disciplinary maturity, a much greater consensus has emerged on the issue of placement. The role of multiple-choice testing has been diminished, though not yet entirely removed, for those campuses using placement as a means to offer extra help to those needing it. In addition to the curricular innovations we have mentioned, the emergence of Directed Self-Placement, in various iterations, has put placement responsibility in the hands of the students themselves, with the institution responsible for providing them with enough and good enough information to make effective decisions. And where testing is still used, the method of choice has become portfolio assessment, either as a supplement to other tests or standing alone. That is to say, within the basic writing subfield, we have crossed the titular threshold from Adler-Kassner's and Wardle's book. By and large, we agree that looking at real pieces of writing in context has virtue and utility. We agree that granting agency and choice to students not only provides a more ethical foot forward but also a more productive one as well. We aren't “going around

in circles." Or perhaps we've moved on to different circles. Being able to point to threshold concepts and a unifying document like the OS have not removed productive debate but rather created an environment for better debates—debates built upon something firm.

### **Snapshot #6: Oxford, Ohio, 2003**

**By Bill**

*After graduate school, I taught at Miami University in Ohio from 2002 to 2005. As chance would have it, the English Department called on me to teach the graduate research methods class in Fall, 2003, four years after I took Ed's methods class. I seized the opportunity to teach a class that had been so transformative for me and we even spent the first month of the course studying Stephen North's text while the students in the class wrote papers similar to the one Ed had assigned (I stole the idea but gave Ed credit) but with a twist: I asked students to write in equal part about the limits of North's categories as they assembled their methodological analysis papers—about universal design as a model for disability access in writing classrooms, online communities for adolescent girls, and civil rights discourse in first-year comp readers, among others. Four years later, those categories seemed even more limited; indeed, North's book was over fifteen years old at that point.*

*Students' reflections on the methods and methodologies in circulation—and the limitations of any taxonomy we might apply to those camps—led into our study of other, more current (at the time) texts about research in the field: Cindy Johanek's Composing Research: A Contextualist Research Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition, and Jim Porter et al.'s influential CCC essay "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change." Both of these foreground the institutional and contextual milieus in which research happens and argue that calling oneself a clinician or an ethnographer is less important than listening to the rhetorical situation and considering how scholarship (its subject as well as its design) can enter into dialectic with the material world. Method and methodology are a means to something much greater. Circa 1998-1999, Ed and I had noted that "camps" inquiring into key issues in BW weren't necessarily listening to each other. But there's an equally important consideration: are scholars listening to context? As the literature on research methods and methodologies shifted toward kairotic moments for inquiry, it seemed like another sign the field was maturing.*

*There are good reasons to be suspicious of narratives that assume progress (basic writing studies has gone through growth and maturation and now we are great!). It's never that simple, of course. However, perhaps as a discipline we have learned to listen—listen better to one another, listen better to our worlds, listen better*

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*to the teachers and friends and colleagues and moments both large and small that can spur positive and productive change.*

*Here is how I will complicate the narrative of growth and maturation: by saying that even as the discipline evolves and fortifies itself, maybe one of the best things we can all do is be more attuned to the little, idiosyncratic moments, the serendipities that can prove productive. I learned something about the field teaching that class but I also made close friends: Jay Dolmage showed up to class wearing a Belle and Sebastian t-shirt and I commented that the band is one of my favorites too; we ended up writing a short essay together for Disability Studies Quarterly a few months later and he has taught me (and the field) a great deal about access and higher education and much more. Better yet, we got to know each other. Serendipity. It expands as surely as the Ed White Supper Club did back in Tucson.*

### **Snapshot #7: Flagstaff, Arizona, 2014**

**By Ed**

*In my early years as a literature professor, I used to teach a Dickens novel or two. My students often grew annoyed at the coincidences that occurred in the story lines, arguing that they made the plots seem contrived. One day in class, I interrupted their complaints by asking, “Tell me, how did you meet the person you are now dating or married to?” After a moment of surprised silence, a student said something like “we bumped into each other on a crowded street corner.” After a chuckle, similar serendipitous moments poured out. After a few moments, a student sitting quietly in the back of the room, muttered, “Dickens is the ultimate realist.”*

*What really matters is not the serendipitous moment, but the ability to seize that moment and recognize its implications and possibilities. As Bill and I wrote this article, exchanging drafts over some months, we both came to see connections and threads barely noticeable at the time. Have we imposed a narrative and theoretical frame on disconnected incidents, or, as we are convinced, was that frame already inherent in the serendipities—and our professional lives—waiting to be discovered?*

### **Conclusion**

George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk argued in their state of the subfield article a few years ago that “providing access to higher education along with appropriate forms of academic support such as basic writing pays off for individuals and for society” (5). Reviewing changes facing BW scholars and practitioners in the 21st Century, Otte and Mlynarczyk conclude optimistically that although political and legislative forces sometimes impose constraints on BW programming, there is power in knowing that our

academic enterprise supports access. Building on their work, we contend that BW is in a position to continue leveraging threshold concepts around sound pedagogy and firm disciplinary apparatuses like the OS to act locally and nationally to build an even more robust BW enterprise. Evidence like the creative and nuanced alternatives to traditional models of “remediation” and “mainstreaming” suggest that the subfield has matured. Our argument, further, is that we all do our best work when we—paradoxically perhaps—remain small, close-knit, and open to serendipity. We have shared our own anecdotes of chance encounters with BW conversations as illustrative of the role that a meal with a mentor, or a chat in an office, can have.

As the BW subfield continues to mature, we offer some modest considerations about chance encounters and maintaining a collaborative and social ethos:

- The basic writing community might continue to encourage scholarly participation and collaboration across institution type via avenues like the Basic Writing SIG at CCCC as well as TYCA (the two-year college association), a group that has itself fostered this ethos with breakfasts and socials at national conferences. In particular, we as a scholarly and pedagogical community concerned with educating BW students might think about ways to encourage even greater integration and productive scholarly exchange *between* four-year and two-year BW professionals.
- We might also consider ways to build more critical, sustained, and sustainable awareness of race and other forms of difference into basic writing gatherings, so as to maintain as hospitable an environment for as many BW professionals as possible. What opportunities do we have to assure that workshops, professional meetings, seminars, and other opportunities can lead to chance encounters for all members of that community?
- One of the key institutional issues that BW scholarship will need to engage in the coming years is dual enrollment or concurrent enrollment programs (wherein high school students take college courses while still in secondary school). In her role as TYCA chair, Eva Payne brought the scope and impact of dual-enrollment to the field’s attention. For BW professionals, implications of dual enrollment are varied depending on state and institutional policies; dual enrollment entails BW being offloaded to secondary school teachers in some contexts while in other contexts successful

completion of a dual enrollment writing course could have impact on a student's placement independent of whether that course had an impact on a student's proficiency. Given the complex nature of this issue, and the added groups of stakeholders that dual-enrollment programs add to the mix, perhaps the BW community can seek ways to foster chance encounters with secondary teachers and other players in the popular dual-enrollment game.

- These are just a few modest ideas that all entail continuing to foster collaboration—though perhaps with an ever-widening cohort. We are thankful for the small moments and chance encounters that have marked us and maintain that moments that are idiosyncratic can and should continue to mark the field as well.

## Notes

1. Thank you, *JBW* editors Hope Parisi and Cheryl Smith, as well as two anonymous reviewers for extremely helpful feedback on this article.
2. We thank Maureen Daly Goggin and Peter Goggin for articulating the notion that “serendipitous moments. . . can occur anytime during a scholarly project” in the call for contributors to their collection on the subject, which is currently in process. Their CFP created a serendipitous, as well as generative, moment for us.
3. Ultimately, the narrative-based essay we wrote did not prove a good fit for that collection. We anticipate its arrival, though, and suspect the book will be a useful contribution to another ongoing, always shifting conversation in the field: the role of the personal and its relationship to the research process.
4. Readers of *JBW* are likely aware of many of these arrangements. Glau offers a helpful overview of the Stretch program at Arizona State University, for example. And Grego and Thompson detail a theoretically sophisticated rationale for the Studio model. More recently, still, Peter Adams and his colleagues at the Community College of Baltimore County have amassed empirical data, institutionally compelling and actionable budgets, and theoretically critical discussions of the Accelerated Learning Program.

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